



The Senate of Maryland
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401-1991

SB 771 - Human Services - Energy Assistance Programs - Administration and Funding

Testimony of Senate President Bill Ferguson

On March 5, 2026

Before the Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment

Why This Bill Matters:

The issue that each of us in the General Assembly is hearing about the most is the challenge our constituents are facing with unacceptably high energy bills. Those bills are creating immense strain on families' monthly budgets, too often creating a dynamic where they need to choose between keeping the heat on, or putting food on the table and paying for life-saving medicine.

Fortunately, Maryland has a variety of energy assistance programs that can support Maryland families facing those impossible decisions. The Office of Home Energy Programs administers:

- The Maryland Energy Assistance Program (MEAP);
- The Gas Arrearage Retirement Assistance Program (GARA);
- The Electric Universal Service Program (EUSP); and
- The Electric Arrearage Retirement Assistance Program (EARA).

Unfortunately, an audit by our DLS Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability (OPEGA) released in February of 2025 noted that these programs are confusing for Marylanders to access and navigate. OPEGA recommended that the General Assembly consider merging these energy assistance programs to streamline the application process and get aid out as quickly as possible.

Specifically, OPEGA noted:

Merging the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) energy assistance into one program could allow for more flexible allocation of federal LIHEAP funds and State special funds. Currently, the segregation between heating-specific programs (the Maryland Energy Assistance Program (MEAP) and the Gas Arrearage Retirement Assistance Program (GARA)) and electric-specific programs (the Electric Universal

Service Program (EUSP) and the Electric Arrearage Retirement Assistance Program (EARA)) creates an artificial barrier that may prevent households from accessing support, solely because of their heating source, as occurred between April and June of 2024 when federal LIHEAP funding for MEAP and GARA was exhausted.

What This Bill Does:

Due to the timing of the OPEGA audit being released midway through the 2025 Legislative Session, we included an amendment in the Next Generation Energy Act (SB937, 2025) requiring the Department of Human Services (DHS) to report back to the General Assembly what statutory and regulatory changes would be required to consolidate these programs.

Senate Bill 771 is responsive to the DHS report and OPEGA audit recommendation, and merges the State's various energy assistance programs into one streamlined program. This will minimize confusion and eliminate artificial barriers preventing our State's residents from receiving the assistance they are eligible for.

Why You Should Vote for This Bill:

At a moment when Marylanders' need for our State's energy assistance programs have never been greater, the most important thing we can do is make them easier to access. Senate Bill 771 takes the lead from our incredible Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability, which is focused on making our government actually work for the people it serves.

By consolidating these various energy assistance programs with differing timelines and criteria, we can make sure our constituents get the help they need as quickly as possible with as few hurdles as possible. To that end, I respectfully request a favorable report on Senate Bill 771.